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ABSTRACT

No matter what pains translators take to produce a target-language text "identical" to the source-language text, criticism and/or translation of an original literary work cannot be the same in different language communities. That translation may change potentialities in the textual experience is particularly obvious in literature with a strong cultural color, such as folkloristic material. Three examples from Danish and English texts illustrate differences at the textual level: in the first case, the order of presentation is altered; in the second case, specialist terminology is omitted; and in the third, one brief but crucial speech has been interpreted in a special way. The common denominator is that the linguistic middlemen have misinterpreted some factors which are organic to the work as a whole. These factors, as well as other linguistic, social, and religious differences reflected in languages, lead to changes in the textual potentialities, and hence differences in the receptions and interpretation of the text in different languages. Criticism based on texts in translation, therefore, applies primarily to the target-language versions and becomes part of the critical heritage, i.e., hypotheses about the readers' experiences, in the target-language culture. With the wider diffusion today of literature from many countries, an awareness of the foregoing considerations is a necessity for contemporary scholars and researchers in literature. (Thirteen references are attached.) (KEH)

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Reader, text, translation, and interpretative potentials

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Abstract

The article posits that 'literature' exists only in and after the reading of a specific literary text, and that criticism is a set of hypotheses about the potentials of specific texts. Provided these two premises are accepted, it is argued that criticism of the source-text and of the target-language text cannot be the same in different language communities, no matter what pains conscientious translators take to produce a target-language text 'identical' to the source-language text.

Explicitly disregarding obvious mistranslations and cuts, the article discusses differences between source-language 'originals' and target-language 'versions' that are introduced at the level of the editor, of the author, and of the translator. Referring to translations of folkloristic texts, and citing evidence from cross-cultural reader response studies, it is argued that texts in translation offer different potentialities than those which they offer in the original: accordingly, criticism based on translation primarily constitutes part of the critical endeavor only in the target language and not in the source-language.

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In the increasing internationalization of literature and literary criticism, critics frequently refer to works of literature that they know only from translation.

There is nothing new in this: the Bible has been studied for nearly two millenia in translation. However, the volume of translated literature and its impact on criticism today call for a review of some problems inherent in the critical use of translations. Apart from passing references in connection with specific translations there has been little discussion of this topic. Yet it is our belief that this phenomenon deserves attention.

In our view the existence of 'literature' is dependent upon a text being read and experienced as 'literature'; to the individual reader, this experience of a text is 'true'. From this point of view criticism is a discipline based on the critic's own experience, and on the critic's ability to make hypotheses about other readers' readings of the text. Criticism may refer to the text, to the interplay between passages, as well as to the mechanisms behind the interplay between text and reading that lead to interpretations, and so on.

We wish to emphasize that after translation the text has undergone a change. This entails that the potentialities for the critic's hypotheses are different in different languages.

Publishing houses may well be the scholar's worst enemy since it is not customary for them to inform readers about textual deviations, or even the suppression of whole passages. Occasionally we have even encountered translators, house editors, and heads of publishing houses who, as a matter of unofficial house policy, accept that books be cut by 10 to 15%.[2] Cuts and textual divergences may even be found in 'the original language': conscientious translators of English-American works may find that the 'original' differs according to its place of publication; thus for instance, the text of John Updike's *Couples* is not 'identical' in Great Britain and the USA. A passage referring to Christine Keeler (of Profumo fame) appears in the American version only.

But although this procedure is probably the greatest single source of differences between originals and 'works in translation', we shall not pursue this point in the subsequent discussion; rather we shall explore some translated texts in terms of their potentialities for critical hypotheses and to a lesser extent in terms of readers' responses. On the one hand, we therefore use a kind of 'close reading' for our discussion of *potential* interpretations, and, on the other hand, we supplement our hypothesis with empirical evidence.

Differences imposed by author

Discrepancies between 'the same text' in two languages may not necessarily involve translation proper. Recently, there has been an upsurge of interest in the Danish author Karen Blixen/Isak Dinesen. She herself wrote her stories in both Danish and English. There are marked differences between her stories in the two languages. The short story 'The Ring' will serve as an illustration:

In the story, a newly-wed couple go for a walk to the sheep pen on their estate. The young wife who has vowed to herself never to keep any secrets from her husband, is happy beyond her wildest dreams. She has a minor altercation with him while they are at the sheep pen, and she walks home by herself. On the way, she wanders into a grove where she meets a dangerous sheep thief. In order to make him disappear she offers him her most precious possession — her wedding ring. It falls to the ground and he vanishes. With her whole world in pieces she meets her husband again, and tells him she has lost her wedding ring but does not know where.

The story was first published in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, in English, in 1950. It later appeared in the Danish and American collection *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958).

The description of the fateful day starts as follows in the English edition:

It was a lovely July morning. Little woolly clouds drifted high up in the sky, the air was full of sweet scents. Lise had on a white muslin frock and a large Italian straw hat. She and her husband took a path through the park; it wound on across the meadows, between small groves and groups of trees, to the sheep-field.

A translation of the Danish version runs:

It was a lovely morning in June. Light fleecy clouds drifted high in the sky, and the air was full of fresh, sweet scents. Lise wore a white frock and a large Italian straw hat with light blue ribbons. She and her husband took a track, romantically winding through the garden and the park, which then became a path leading across the meadow, between clusters of large trees, across a creek and along a grove, to the sheep pens. (Our translation).

Later, when Lise stretches out her hand with her wedding ring towards the sheep-thief, the English version runs:

But he did not take the ring. As *she* let it go it dropped to the ground ... (our italics)

whereas the Danish version runs as follows:

But he did not take the ring. As *he* let go, it fell to the ground ... (our italics)

The extracts reveal that in Danish there is greater detail, there are more colors, and the story takes place in late spring; here the young wife's betrayal of her marriage vows is less pronounced. Conversely, the

atmosphere is rather more down-to-earth in the English version. It is summer, and the female protagonist takes the main initiative in the spiritual adultery that takes place: in other words, we argue that potential interpretations (based on the 'same' text in Danish and in English respectively) differ most markedly in terms of the degree to which the young wife is aware of her sexual desires.[3]

But Karen Blixen insisted that she was a story-teller rather than an 'author'; consequently, she was entitled to make whatever changes she liked between different versions of what she herself considered the same story; and, as the originator of the story, she had the 'droit moral', the copyright, to do so.

The translator's evaluation

The suppression of passages and indisputable mistranslations constitute by far the largest single source of differences between source language originals and translated versions; nevertheless, we shall disregard such infelicitous changes in the present context. Instead we will give three examples of how the overall textual potentialities are changed in linguistic transmissions.

The three cases differ at the textual level; in the first example, the order of presentation is altered; in the second example, specialist terminology is omitted; and in the third, one brief but crucial speech has been interpreted in a special way. The common denominator is that the linguistic middlemen have interpreted some factor(s) which is(are) organic to the work as a whole; these lead to changes in the textual potentialities, and hence differences in the reception and interpretation of the text in different languages.

The first instance concerns a children's classic: Heinrich Hoffmann's *Der Struwwelpeter*. Hoffmann wrote the illustrated book for his three-year old son and was later persuaded to publish it; the book came out in 1845. The German book has a strong didactic slant; it opens with the poem about Struwwelpeter, who refuses to allow his hair and nails to be cut, and then goes into details the about disasters which befall disobedient children.

The book was translated into Danish as early as 1847 by Simon Simonsen, a businessman who wrote occasional verses. The verses read fluently and amusingly in Danish, and the book has retained its popular-

Figure 1. *Cover of the first German edition of* Struwwelpeter. *It shows Struwwelpeter who refuses to have his hair and nails cut.*

ity to the present day: in 1986 it was published in a new edition (280,000 copies). In the present context, there is, however, a significant shift in emphasis between the German and the Danish texts. In the German book, Struwwelpeter's sins are exposed at the beginning; in the Danish translation he has been relegated to the last page. The first story in Danish is 'Die Geschichte von dem schwarzen Buben' in which 'der grosse Nikolaus' (the original father Christmas with his red hat) punishes three 'racist' boys by dipping them in ink. In Danish one of the boys is holding a Danish flag in his hand; Nikolaus' top hat is blue; he is 'Den store Bastian'; and his name is also the title of the book: *Den store Bastian.*

The emphasis in the German book is on the disregard of parental advice, or on wrong-doing for which the perpetrators are punished; and the only story where retribution is inflicted by an outside agent, 'der grosse Nikolaus', is not set apart. Conversely, it is this very superhuman

Figure 2. *Cover of the Danish translation of* Struwwelpeter, *Den store Bastian. Den store Bastian is dipping the racist boys in ink; one of them has a Danish flag in his hand.*

agent of morality who takes pride of place and title in the Danish 'adaptation'; the shift is so momentous that it has become part of the target-language culture: 'Den store Bastian' is the proverbial bogeyman, not only for disobedient children but also adults.[4]

The other example is discussed by Jennifer Draskau (1989) in considerable detail: An English juvenile book details the gradual initiation of a young girl into the world of horsemanship. In the English original the girl's initial scepticism is shown by negatively loaded words; and, according to the point-of-view, the book is replete with horseman's terminology or 'specialist language'. In the translation there is no distinction between these types of language use; in addition a number of specialist terms have been translated by incorrect equivalents which are too narrow, too broad, or simply from other fields.

In this case, the effect of the translated text was checked with both non-

specialists and specialists. The non-specialists had no serious problems with the book in translation, although the original author's intention of familiarizing readers with horse terminology, and of creating verisimilitude as well as entertainment for 'aficionados', was clearly lost. The 'specialist readers' (mostly juvenile hobbymen), however, had a low tolerance of the mistranslated terms, and this destroyed their concentration on the book as reading matter.

The third example of how an interpretation shifts the potentialities of a work is taken from subtitling. The television play *Sweet William* by British author Beryl Bainbridge runs for about 60 minutes. In the opening scene the protagonist, an English girl, is saying goodbye to her (British) fiancé who is leaving for America. Immediately afterwards, she falls in love with an American playwright. She becomes pregnant and decides to have the child, although her new lover is married, chases women, and does not want to marry her.

When the girl becomes aware of her condition, she confides in another woman, who asks her:

'Did you take the pill?'
'I meant to.' (in a previous scene we saw her pull open a drawer and discover that she had not taken her pill).

As far as anybody could see at this stage, the Danish subtitle rendered this correctly.

'Did you forget to take your pill?'
'I did not forget.'

But the emphasis has been shifted radically in terms of the play's wider context: what appeared accidental, perhaps the result of an unconscious wish in English, becomes a conscious act in Danish where the girl deliberately chooses to conceive a child.

The implications of the change in this crucial scene become obvious at the end of the play: the new mother is sitting with her baby, her glance roams around in the room, until it falls on the picture of her original British fiancé. She looks at the baby, and then again at the picture — and smiles.

To an English audience, it is clear that the girl's British fiancé fathered the child. If we assume that her 'forgetfulness' was unconscious, she conceived a child by a reasonably pleasant man in the English version.

The Danish audience, on the other hand, is left in no doubt that this is the story of a girl who deliberately became pregnant by an unsavoury character. Whereas good wins out in English, bad is perpetuated in Danish.

It will be appreciated that in the three cases adduced there are extenuating circumstances, at least insofar as we may assume that none of the three linguistic middlemen were consciously aware that their interpretations changed the potentialities in the reception of new audiences. Our point is not to chastise them for their 'negligence', but merely to illustrate that when translators subjectively evaluate passages in a source text, this may affect the text. The more 'organic' the component is in the text as a whole, the greater the chance that the text will alter course in the translation process; and, accordingly, that the target-language text will no longer be interpreted along the same lines as the original.

Social and cultural differences

Our argument that translation may change potentialities in the textual experience is, we suggest, particularly obvious in literature with a strong cultural color, such as folkloristic material. We believe that both good and bad translation may change the potentialities, that is, the critical hypotheses as well as the readers' responses because of the linguistic, social, and cultural transfers involved.

A folktale collected by the Danish folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen has been translated into English for Stith Thompson's *One Hundred Favorite Folktales* (1968). In the tale, three brothers in turn take service with an ogre. The agreement is that they will be paid a princely sum, but if they lose their tempers, they will be ignominiously kicked out. The ogre cheats the two first brothers by promising them food 'tomorrow' several days running until, irritated by their hunger, they lose their tempers and their jobs. But when we compare the American version with the Danish original, we notice, for instance, that the long description of how the ogre and his wife are eating (while the first son goes hungry) is left out. In the Danish original the young men's father takes leave of his sons with the parting words 'I cannot afford to keep you here at home any longer *and feed you*'; the three last words in the Danish original are omitted in the American translation.

In this case it is not only hunger as a daily reality for the original

audience which is lost on the modern American audience. The American version can be interpreted in completely different ways: the three brothers are motivated only by greed in their dealings with the ogre; their father simply rids himself of Oedipal rivals; and he is a bad father who acts summarily and arbitrarily. We hear nothing of his real motives, of his poverty, and of the family's hunger, in other words, of the problems of sheer survival.

The inevitability of differences

So far we have been arguing from the viewpoint that criticism is a system of hypotheses about potential responses; however, we have only shown that in terms of textual criticism, there may be translation or linguistic transfers which non-specialists would probably call infelicitous. We believe, however, that differences are sometimes unavoidable, because of linguistic, social, religious or cultural differences which are reflected in languages.

We must stress at the outset that there is no taxonomy in the discussion below although the first example will be a word:

In 1985 we supervised the translation of a Greenlandic tale into Danish and English; later readers from different countries were invited to read the story. The story deals with a woman who stays with a bear, betrays it and is punished.

In the story, the bear 'flenses' a seal. Danish and Greenlandic readers were familiar with the word ('cut up a seal') and registered no surprise. Conversely, the typical reaction to the term by readers from the English-speaking world was, for instance, "'Flense' is not a very common word in English, nine-tenths of the population don't know what this means". And, "'Flense'. What's that? ... It is a word I never heard before, can't even guess what it means".

At a higher level it is interesting to note that the story as a whole was disliked and regarded as incoherent by the majority of our sixty readers from Denmark, USA, and other western countries. Conversely the report of the majority of our almost one hundred Greenlandic, Indian, and Nigerian readers did not indicate any distaste.[5] So there may be some cross-cultural similarities in the response to literature that go well beyond the textual level.

In 1980 we had similarly supervised the translation of a Turkish tale.

In this tale a girl has to steal 'Beyoglu's apple'. On her way to do so, she stays overnight with an old woman who provides her with helpers. Because of this the girl is successful and brings the young prince Beyoglu's apple home to her father. Beyoglu, who has fallen in love with her, has her abducted by doves, and in the end the young couple are married by imams.

In this case, one difference in an interpretation strand became clear in the process of translation. In the Turkish original by Pertev Boratev (1969), direct and indirect references to religion are interwoven in the story. In the beginning, the girl prompts her father to take a wager on her ability to obtain the apple, because she thinks that she will succeed with Allah's help. She comes to a bridge which her horse is afraid to cross. She goes to do 'abdest', which can mean to 'take a crap', or to 'make holy ablutions' depending on the Turkish verb which follows. In the story the work 'yapmak' means the the girl takes a crap. However, this word is archaic, so some modern Turkish readers confused it with the other expression 'abdest almak': to make holy ablutions: 'The girl is able to succeed because she performs her ablutions, and is able to cross the bridge (because God helps those who have faith). Faith and religion should go before all else.'[6] The Danish 'equivalent' of this phrase would be incapable of rendering this subtle point.

Other references to religion could be rendered in Danish. This goes for an exclamation of the girl's when Beyoglu has manœuvred her into a bathhouse and she is about to undress: 'Allah take the tailor: he has made the buttonholes too tight'. This remark serves as the girl's excuse for not taking off her clothes, and thus it implicitly protects her virginity.

In the original Turkish story it is therefore much more obvious that the girl's quest for legitimate access to sex is sanctioned by religion than in the Danish version. Sophisticated Danish readers did respond to the textual strand stressing that the girl obtained legitimized sex, but none of the 150 readers considered the religious aspect important.[7]

Another unavoidable difference connects with the name of the young man, 'Beyoglu', whose apple the young girl must steal. When she finally meets him, readers from Denmark, USA, and Greenland typically stated that they had believed him to be an ogre. The Turkish readers reported no such associations[8]: the explanation is probably that the name is popular in Turkish tales; and that in Turkish it is easy to see that it is composed of 'bey', a powerful man, and 'oglu', meaning 'son of'. Thus Turkish readers will know that 'Beyoglu' must be some kind of prince. It is, in other words, an illustration of how readers with different cultural backgrounds

will differ in their preconceived idea of characters on the basis of 'etymologically transparent' names.

In view of the fact that the above examples are taken from conscientious translations which have been carefully checked and revised, we must posit that differences at the textual level are inevitable in translation. This being so, translations will differ from originals: since criticism is a systematic establishment of hypotheses about the experience of texts, the hypotheses it may establish on the basis of the 'same text' in different languages are not necessarily identical.

Cross-cultural vs. cultural components in texts

One problem about the different assessment of potential readings, about the hypotheses we make about them *in criticism*, and about the interpretations based on the 'original' versus 'translations' is that we rarely see 'original' and 'translation(s)' simultaneously. Essentially, we are faced here with questions about the universality of phenomena and the applicability of our critical hypotheses.

Let us, for instance, consider some of the tasks we encounter in folktales from all over the world. We all know about the little girl who has to carry water from the well in a sieve, and the maid who has to wash a mountain of black linen. No matter what ulterior symbolic and psychological interpretations we give to these acts, it does not take much imagination to realize that these images of impossible tasks were born out of a reality where young servant girls felt desperate when they had to collect water in leaky pails or launder the linen of a large household. No tolerably faithful translation could change the universality of the surface inspiration.

But what about the numerous transformations into princes that occur when the princess kisses/kills the dog, the horse, the frog? Psychologically these offer few problems insofar as they provide universally understandable pictures of sudden infatuation, of the magic of falling in love. But who are we falling in love with? In the *Arabian Nights* we find few transformed dogs: horses, perhaps stones, and the like — but not dogs. In northern Europe, dogs abound; and in the Greenlandic stories we know about, the potentially human animals are usually seals or polar bears. At this point there is a cultural and psychological variation which a translation cannot solve: different cultures have different high-status

animals that may turn into men; or, conversely, low-status animals which show the animal side of man.

As symbols, these culture-bound norms about animal transformation do not apply in other cultures. Yet it would be simplistic to believe that we can exchange one animal for another — for the underlying psychology also differs from tale to tale, from text to text.

Concluding remarks

We cannot solve the problem, but only identify it: once a work of literature is translated it has undergone a process of interpretation (by the translator) and adaptation (to the new language). In this process, some passages and phenomena in the text shift their weight and importance for the 'interpretative potential'.

In some respects, there is little new in this contention: our understanding of writers and schools of writers changes over the ages, and even with individual readers in the course of a lifetime. Criticism of texts in translation is a legitimate part of the critical endeavor. It may be useful for our understanding of the 'original', as long as we bear in mind that there is a translation, 'an interposed text', behind the criticism.

Yet the fact is that some critical hypotheses about the 'same work' are not equally viable in all languages, or, in other words, *criticism based on texts in translation applies primarily to the target-language versions and becomes part of the critical heritage i.e. of the hypotheses about the readers' experiences, in the target-language culture.*[9]

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Notes

1. We agree with scholars who argue that translated works, notably those which enjoy wide popularity with target-language audiences, may legitimately be viewed as part of the target-language culture (see for example Pedersen 1984, 1988: 95–108); further references are given by Nielsen (1988: 362); but this is not really central to the thrust of our argument in the present article.
2. During the research behind Dollerup (1987), this curious fact surfaced several times in talks with professionals. It must be stressed that the practice is never sanctioned publicly. The most interesting feature is that when the question is broached 'sub rosa', most professionals know of these practices in connection with translations into all languages.

The reason is not hard to find: a rule of thumb indicates that a good translation demands 10 to 15 per cent more text than the original (with variations between languages). In the article 'Seriously subversive' (Times Literary Supplement May 19–25, 1989: 546, Keith Walker cites an English example of the practice. Santoyo (1989) amply documents the widespread use in Spanish translations of English works.

3. Since we have encountered the objection that the shift to active adultery may have been a misprint ('she' for 'he'), it must be stressed that (a) the writer of the Danish version and of the English version was the same, viz. Karen Blixen; (b) that the texts we are discussing are both copyrighted by her estate; and (c) that no real-life reader will be comparing the Danish and the English texts; collations of the type we have made are in the province of translation critics only.
4. Stybe (1971) discusses the reception of *Struwwelpeter*, including its history in Denmark. The first Danish edition had the title 'Vær Lydig' (i.e. be obedient). The story of 'Den store Bastian' was, however, always the first one in Danish editions, and it became the title of the book in 1867.
5. The results of the readers' experiences during the reading (Danes, Greenlanders, and Americans) is discussed in Dollerup et al. (1988). The readers' responses after the reading (Danes, Greenlanders, Indians, and Nigerians) are listed in an edited form in Bennet et al. (1989).
6. For the information on Turkish responses we are indebted to Doltas and Sevgen (1985).
7. For a further discussion, see Dollerup et al. (1985: 43–59).
8. See Doltas and Sevgen (1985). However, the 'etymological explanation' is one we suggest.
9. The present article is a work from the Research Unit for Experimental Studies in Reader Response, c/o The Translation Center and the Department of English, University of Copenhagen. The studies referred to in the article have been supported by Unesco; by the Nato Scientific Affairs Division; and by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities.

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